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SRI LANKA IN 1986

A Nation at the Crossroads

Bryan Pfaffenberger

As the year 1986 drew to a close, Sri Lanka found itself no closer to solving the Tamil separatist crisis. Fighting for a separate nation in Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern provinces are several Tamil militant groups, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Tamil Eelam is the name militant groups propose for the new state). The Colombo government, to be sure, is attempting to negotiate a settlement with Tamil political representatives (and with assistance from New Delhi). Yet intractable issues still separate the two parties and a settlement remains elusive.

What became starkly apparent in 1986 was the enormous cost this conflict is exacting from Sri Lanka, a country that is ill-prepared to pay the price, ranking as it does among the world's 20 poorest nations. The war has cast a chill on diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka's nearest neighbor, India. Defense expenditures and sharply reduced tourist arrivals are derailing a promising program of economic development. Most distressing of all, however, is that the Colombo government's draconian security measures are posing a threat to one of Asia's most praiseworthy traditions of democracy and civil liberties. As President J. R. Jayewardene himself warned in 1986, "It is very difficult to safeguard against terrorism while guaranteeing the freedom of the individual. It may not be long before we compromise the very beliefs on which democracy is built."¹ Political developments within Sri Lanka have led many to speculate whether the day of compromise has already arrived.

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1. "Address to Parliament by His Excellency the President on 20th February, 1986," reprinted as an appendix in *Statement of His Excellency the President J.R. Jayewardene to the Political Parties' Conference as Chairman of the Conference on the Proposals for the Devolution of Power to Provincial Councils* (Colombo: Department of Government Printing, 1986).

The Negotiations

Representatives of six Tamil political groups formulated in 1985 a list of four principles that could serve as the basis of a political settlement: a recognition of Sri Lanka Tamils as a distinct nationality, the creation of a Tamil homeland by joining together the existing Northern and Eastern provinces, the right of self-determination of the Tamil nation, and the right to full citizenship of all Tamils living in Sri Lanka. The United National Party (UNP) government of President J.R. Jayewardene viewed the first three principles as tantamount to secession, and refused to view them as even a starting point for the negotiating process. It addressed the fourth demand in a way that made a major political point. Through the mediation of C. Thondaman, a UNP minister and representative of the so-called Indian Tamils of the tea-growing central highlands, 96,000 stateless persons were granted full Sri Lankan citizenship.² The government's point was that the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—and other Sri Lanka Tamil organizations, including those consisting of the militants—cannot claim to speak for other Tamil-speaking groups, such as the ethnically distinct Indian Tamils and Tamil-speaking Moslems.

The most moderate of the Tamil groups, the TULF, subsequently put forward a revised set of proposals in December 1985 that proposed a "reasonable solution," namely, that a Tamil state could be created within the present framework of the Sri Lankan constitution with powers similar to an autonomous state in India. The proposal³ again entailed four elements:

1. Devolution of legislative, administrative, and judicial authority to appointed Provincial Governors and elected Provincial Assemblies;
2. Union of the Northern and Eastern provinces as a single Tamil homeland;
3. Provincial autonomy in matters related to police and internal law and order; and
4. Provincial autonomy in matters relating to the allocation of land, including allotments within areas irrigated by inter-provincial development schemes such as the Mahaweli Ganga project.

2. Manik de Silva, "Stateless No More," *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*, February 6, 1986, p. 30.

3. M. Sivasithambaram (President, TULF) and A. Amirthalingam (Secretary General) to Shri Rajiv Gandhi (Prime Minister of India), December 1, 1985.

After considering the TULF proposals, the government put forth a revised version of the Provincial Councils proposal that had been offered during the 1984 and 1985 negotiations. The new proposal, which was published on June 18, acquiesced to the TULF demand for provincial autonomy in matters of internal law and order as well as the allocation of agricultural land. It was widely speculated that the new proposals reflected pressure from the international lending community, which was to meet in Paris the next day to consider the extension of aid programs to Sri Lanka. The United States had already cut its foreign aid to Sri Lanka from US\$50 million to \$37 million, a move widely interpreted as an effort—perhaps requested by New Delhi—to put the squeeze on Colombo to make meaningful concessions to the Tamils.⁴ The lending agencies voted to increase aid to Sri Lanka by 20% in 1986, but there were hints that they might pull out in 1987 if the war does not end.⁵

Despite these concessions, the government refused to agree to a point of major symbolic and political significance to Sri Lanka Tamils—the union of the Northern and Eastern provinces as a single Tamil “homeland” or “linguistic unit.” Pointing out that the Eastern province is ethnically fragmented, the government questioned the TULF’s mandate to speak for the Moslem and Sinhalese communities of that province, which in fact make up 60% of its population. A further objection: the government considers it contrary to constitutional guarantees of freedom of movement and residence to set aside an area as the exclusive possession of one ethnic community.⁶

Underlying the government’s objections to the unification of the Northern and Eastern provinces as a Tamil homeland or linguistic unit, however, is a broader concern—namely, political survival. For the Sinhalese Buddhist ethnic community, the entire isle of Sri Lanka, including the Jaffna Peninsula, is historically destined to preserve the Buddhist religion. It is highly doubtful whether any elected government in Sri Lanka could survive politically after making concessions that Buddhists would consider contrary to this claim, such as giving the Northern and Eastern provinces explicit status as a Tamil homeland. As if to drive this point home, 1986 witnessed the formation of the Movement for the Defense of the Nation (MDN), an organization formed by former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike (of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) and several top prelates of Buddhist organizations. The MDN’s avowed purpose is to prevent the

4. *Economist*, June 21, 1986, pp. 38–39.

5. *Economist*, August 9, 1986, p. 20.

6. “Observations on the [TULF] Proposals,” appended to “Address to Parliament by the President on 20th February, 1986.”

passage of the legislation authorizing provincial councils; an underlying purpose, doubtless, is to embarrass the UNP government for reasons of political expediency by appealing to Sinhalese Buddhist sentiment.

The fate of the government's June proposals cast doubt on the viability of the negotiation process. Negotiations carried on with the TULF have of necessity an air of fantasy about them since the moderate party has little credibility among the militants. Indeed, TULF members are living in exile and fear travel to Jaffna, where two TULF figures have been assassinated. The TULF, for its part, considers the government proposals "reasonable," but it could do little more than ferry them to the militants' political offices in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where Tamil militant groups are widely known—despite New Delhi's repeated denials—to operate training camps. The militants rejected the Colombo government's proposals out of hand on November 3,⁷ claiming that they failed to meet even the most basic Tamil demands for political autonomy in a Tamil homeland.⁸ Spokesmen for the groups claimed that the President's "limitless" executive powers would allow him to abrogate any settlement negotiated under the current terms of Colombo's offer.⁹

In an unexpected development, the Tamil Nadu government jailed at least 500 Tamil militants a few days after the rejection of the proposals. The official pretext was security concerns regarding the Bangalore visit of President Jayewardene to the South Asian Association for Regional Security (SAARC). It was, however, widely speculated that the move had its origins in New Delhi and was intended to prod the militants to make concessions. Arms ranging from grenades to surface-to-air missiles were seized. The militants were freed after the conclusion of the SAARC meetings, and on November 17 the militants, without explanation, withdrew an October threat to declare the independence of Tamil Eelam unilaterally on January 1, 1987.¹⁰ An additional factor may have been the Tamil Nadu government's growing impatience with the militants' behavior. On November 1, Tamil militants belonging to the leftist Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) opened fire against a crowd that had been demonstrating against the arms-toting militants' abusive and coercive activities. A boy was killed. The same day, members of another Sri Lanka

7. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organizations (EROS), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Organization (EPRLO), and People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

8. *FEER*, November 13, 1986, p. 10.

9. *Hindustani Times*, November 5, 1986, p. 4.

10. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1986, p. 1.

Tamil militant group—People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)—were involved in a shoot-out elsewhere.

Despite the apparent efforts of international lending agencies and the Indian government to prod the parties to make concessions, it was clear by year's end that the negotiations had reached what may well be an insurmountable impasse. The government sent a mission in late December to the LTTE's northern Sri Lanka stronghold, only to find the militants to be firm in their basic demands for a separate state. For the LTTE, mistrust of the Colombo government is deep and pervasive; no agreement will suffice save one that gives Tamils a form of provincial autonomy and self-determination that can be abrogated only by the consent of the province's population. Here the militants doubtless speak authentically for the Tamil community; there is no gauge that can measure the depth of Tamil mistrust of Colombo's intentions. For its part, the Colombo government believes that the guarantees demanded by the Tamils would require a new constitution, which under the present Sri Lankan constitution would require recourse to a public referendum. Yet the Sinhalese electoral majority will never agree to a new constitution developed on lines dictated by the Tamil minority, and a government that was perceived as handing over part of Sri Lanka for a Tamil homeland could not survive in a democratic environment. It is for precisely this reason that the survival of the democratic environment itself is at risk in Sri Lanka; the government may well be tempted to dispense with democracy so that the necessary concessions can be made.

The Tamil community has drawn together during the present crisis, rallying around the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The LTTE, for its part, has consolidated its leadership by wiping out a rival called the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO). It is still open to question, however, whether the LTTE has the full support of the Tamil community. Some observers of the Jaffna scene believe Tamils support the LTTE chiefly as a way of defending themselves from the Sri Lanka security forces. As one journalist put it, the people are "visibly afraid of the Tigers, but they dislike the [Sri Lanka] Army even more."

Now that the Jaffna Peninsula has fallen under the control of the LTTE, the scene of military action has shifted to the Eastern province, where the brutality of both parties to the conflict—the Tamil militants and the Sri Lanka security forces—has become starkly apparent. Tamil militant operations are designed to expel Sinhalese settlers from lands considered to lie within the "Tamil homeland." The first such incident was the brutal slaying in 1984 of 65 Sinhalese ex-convicts and members of their families, including children, who were settled in former Tamil refugee camps in the

North Central province. Such attacks continued throughout 1985. In the opening months of 1986, more than 90 unarmed Eastern province Sinhalese civilians—again including children—were killed by Tamil militants' attacks or bombs.

According to Amnesty International, such actions by the Tamil militant groups are typically followed by indiscriminate security force attacks on unarmed Tamil civilians, resulting in hundreds of extrajudicial killings and disappearances. Effective remedies against such actions are rendered impotent by a series of draconian emergency regulations, comparable to South African statutes in their disregard for civil liberties,¹¹ as well as rigid control of the press (which collectively refused to publish a paid ad by a human rights group in Colombo this year).¹² The Colombo government, to be sure, denies Amnesty International's accusations. Long-term observers of the human rights scene in Sri Lanka agree, however, that the security forces' behavior will lead them to repeat the mistakes of their campaign in Jaffna, which succeeded only in convincing the Tamil community that even the LTTE is preferable to the Colombo government's security forces.

The Costs of Conflict

The Sri Lankan crisis continues to chill diplomatic relations between Colombo and New Delhi. For its part, India doubtless resents the apparent incapacity of the Colombo government to make meaningful concessions to the Tamils, a failure that has brought a tidal wave of Tamil nationalism to the shores of southern India. There is, doubtless, fear in New Delhi that Sri Lanka Tamil propagandists operating in Madras will reignite the Tamil separatist issue in Tamil Nadu, an issue that only twenty years ago was deemed a threat to the Indian republic. An ominous development in keeping with this view was a demonstration in October, which followed a New Delhi official's call for a "Hindi week" for government correspondence. Crowds took to the South India streets for the first time in years to protest New Delhi's alleged "linguistic imperialism." S. Ramachandran, the Tamil Nadu electricity minister, warned of a "Sri Lanka-type situation" in South India unless New Delhi guarantees the regional use of Tamil by amending the Indian Constitution.¹³

11. Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka Disappearances* (New York: Amnesty International, 1986).

12. V.G. Kulkarni, "Government Gets What Government Wants," *FEER*, October 16, 1986, p. 26.

13. Mohan Ram, "Tamils on the Warpath," *FEER*, October 23, 1986, pp. 40-41.

Tension between India and Sri Lanka over the ethnic conflict led to a war of words early in the year. India's Foreign Minister, Baliram Bhagat, pointed to "elements of genocide" in the Sri Lanka situation.¹⁴ In reply, Sri Lanka's President Jayewardene asserted that the New Delhi government was enfeebled by the "parochial politics of India," which prevented New Delhi from taking the obvious steps against the presence of anti-Sri Lanka insurgents within its borders.¹⁵ He added that the Sri Lankan conflict "would be over in three months" if India would expel the militants and close down their bases.¹⁶

More serious than the chill in Indo-Sri Lankan diplomatic relations is the huge cost of the conflict to Sri Lanka's economy. Sri Lanka's GDP growth for 1986 was expected to fall to 4% in real terms compared with the 5% pace set in the previous three years, a development that is partially attributable to a 50% decline in tea prices and adverse weather conditions. A budgetary deficit in excess of 10% of the country's GDP was expected for 1986. A major cause for the country's declining economic performance is the near-ruinous increase in defense expenditure, which has burgeoned from Rs. 560 million in 1978 to Rs. 10 billion in 1986.¹⁷ Another casualty of the conflict is tourism. Arrivals in 1985 totaled 257,456, down 19% from the 1984 figure.¹⁸ Tamil militant operations in Colombo early in 1986 doubtless led to further sharp declines in tourist arrivals: 16 people, mostly foreign tourists, died in an early May bombing of an Air Lanka jet. Still another potential casualty of the conflict is the massive Mahaweli development scheme, which seeks to achieve self-sufficiency in rice production by settling landless peasants on irrigated lands. Since much of the newly developed land lies within the Northern and Eastern provinces, which have been the scene of brutal conflict in recent years, the government may have trouble finding Sinhalese colonists willing to take the allotments. In his budget speech to Parliament, Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel did not exaggerate when he remarked, "Peace must return to our troubled land. . . . Without peace this country faces complete ruin."¹⁹

Perhaps the greatest danger facing Sri Lanka, however, is that continued conflict may contribute to further erosion in Sri Lanka's long tradition of political democracy and commitment to human rights—an erosion that

14. Manik de Silva, "They Protest Too Much," *FEER*, March 20, 1986, pp. 46-47.

15. "Address to Parliament by the President on 20th February 1986."

16. Quoted in Manik de Silva, "Return to Violence," *FEER*, March 6, 1986, p. 48.

17. Ronnie de Mel, Minister of Finance and Planning, "Budget Speech," *Daily News*, November 13, 1986, pp. 10-13.

18. *Daily News*, November 13, 1986, p. 12.

19. Ronnie de Mel, *Budget Speech: 1987, Part II* (Kotte: Ministry of Finance and Planning, 1986), pp. 125-126.

President Jayewardene himself foresaw in 1985. Facing pressure from international lending agencies and understanding only too well how much the conflict is hurting the economy, the Colombo government may well be tempted to stifle internal dissent so that a negotiated solution can be achieved. The Colombo government has enacted draconian legislation and developed fearsome security forces to cope with the Tamil militants; the danger is that it may use these formidable weapons to silence political opposition within the Sinhalese community. An ominous move in this direction was the 1986 revival of emergency regulations used during the 1971 youth insurrection, during which persons who attempted to coerce members of Parliament could be summarily deprived of their civil rights. The revival of these regulations was aimed at the Movement for Defense of the Nation (MDN). It signifies, ominously, that the government increasingly believes that the measures required to bring peace to Sri Lanka—namely, the granting of full and inalienable provincial autonomy to Sri Lanka Tamils—cannot be reconciled with the existing tradition of parliamentary democracy. Among observers of Sri Lanka, it is no longer considered out of the question to speculate that, in the years to come, this democratic tradition will be scrapped in favor of an authoritarian regime. If so, we have yet to witness the greatest tragedy in the long and troubled history of ethnic conflict in the island nation.